

It seems not so long ago that we bought our kerosene in bottles or in a four-gallon tin, trimmed the old buggy lamps, harnessed the horse and took the girl friend to a country dance. It is now the jet age when thousands of gallons of kerosene are pumped into an aircraft and we are carried across the world in a matter of hours.

In this fast moving jet age now upon us, in these times of large streamlined aircraft perhaps we are inclined too quickly to forget that but a few short years have passed since the aircraft that blazed our overseas trail, Brisbane to Singapore and return, occupied four days in each direction. This job will soon be done by Boeing 707s almost between sunrise and sunset.

It was on the morning of Christmas Day, December 25, 1934 that the first Australian crew left Brisbane to survey the Brisbane-Singapore route. It was on February 22, 1935, that the first of the aircraft built specially for the air-mail route to Singapore, a DH86, VH-USF, set out from Darwin on the first official service. This aircraft arrived back in Darwin with the first official inward mail carried by Australian aircraft and Australian crew on February 26, 1935.

The DH86, equipped with four 6-cylinder inverted Gypsy engines and with a seating capacity of 10 and sometimes a load capacity of one or two passengers and a crew of 2 has been spoken of as a wood and wire aeroplane; that, putting it mildly, is a libel. The DH86 had its shortcomings but what aeroplane does not? Perhaps the DH86 was a little temperamental at take-off but once off the ground she could be flown in anything but severe turbulence with two fingers on the 'stick'. She would fly from Darwin to Koepang across the Timor Sea on little more fuel than now needed to get a large jet into the air. Five DH86's, VHUSC, VHUSD, VHUSF, VHUSE and VHUUA, carried mail and passengers on our overseas air-mail route between Brisbane and Singapore over several years and never harmed a soul. In fair weather and foul, through a genuine cyclone over the Timor Sea indeed, through the dry heat of western Queensland and the rains of the tropics; in and out of small fields such as Roma, Winton, Brunette Downs and Newcastle Waters then were; without radio navigational aids and very little in the way of communications facilities; with crews that worked up to 16 or more hours per day four days in a row; with all this and more the DH86 and those that flew and maintained them laid the foundation stones upon which the jet age aeroplane of today will operate.

There were good days with the bad; there was some fun with the hard work. Let us, therefore, look back on a flight from Brisbane to Singapore

remembering however that there were no automatic pilots; there were no hosties to serve meals and indeed sometimes there was little in the way of wholesome meals; there were all too often no ground crews to handle mail and baggage; there were no booking agents at some of the smaller stopping places and sometimes the nearest maintenance engineer was a thousand miles or more away. Remember too that although two pilots' licences, a navigator's licence and a 1st Class Flight Radio Operator's and a Division "X" Radio licence must be aboard, these must necessarily be held within a total crew of two; flight crews were of necessity multi qualified.

On our sample flight we are out of bed around 3.30 a.m. in time to collect the ship's papers at the office, call at the G.P.O. for outgoing mail, carefully supervise the loading of the aircraft with special emphasis on balance, collect passengers' tickets, ensure that a few spare newspapers for helpful agents along the way are aboard, and do the other hundred and one things necessary for a 6 a.m. departure. The weather is fine. The forecast is for strong south easterlies; the found winds are strong north westerlies but we guessed they would be and had planned accordingly. After a call at Roma for fuel and a cup of tea with egg sandwiches on we go to Charleville where steak and eggs are awaiting us for lunch on the aerodrome.

The connecting service from Cootamundra with the Sydney & Melbourne mail is late so we amuse ourselves by scraping mud from the wheels and spats which mud has resulted from local unseasonable rain. In due course we depart some two hours late because of the late arrival of the connecting service; we send feathers flying as we fly through kite hawks riding the updraughts of western Queensland. At Blackall, our next port of call to put down a passenger, the agent, a local garage man, is not at the aerodrome. Someone fires a Verey signal hoping the agent will see it and hasten. The Verey signal sets the grass afire so we hasten instead! Longreach for afternoon tea but we must first "shoot up" the aerodrome in the hope of hunting a mob of goats clear of the runway. Onward to Winton and the sun is setting as we leave there on the last leg of the day to Cloncurry. The 'Curry airway rotating light soon comes up ahead. After seeing the passengers into cars, (or perhaps one car that makes two or three trips to town), ensuring that the aircraft is secured and the mail locked away we are free for a late dinner and a sleep.

Next morning we are astir about 4 am and, after a cup of tea and toast in the hotel kitchen, the local mail is collected from a very sleepy boy at the Post Office. It is not yet light as we leave Clon-

curry for Mt. Isa and then Camooweal for breakfast. Daylight soon comes in and we can see the smoke stack of the Mt. Isa mine a useful navigational aid when approaching from the east. This week we drop mail and freight at Anthony's Lagoon; the next service will do this at Alexandria Station. On this occasion we have a car axle to drop. We hear later that it went straight in and that it was recovered only after three days hard digging. Onward again; Brunette Downs for morning tea, thence Newcastle Waters and so to Daly Waters for lunch. Between Daly Waters and Darwin we spy Doctor Fenton in his Moth; we fly close by and exchange greetings by sign language and give the good Doctor a taste of our slipstream—very foolish but good fun.

At Darwin there is a maintenance crew so the mail is moved to the Post Office while the aircraft is inspected. During the evening we visit the MET man and his wife and enjoy recorded music and a yarn; we also discuss tomorrow's weather which is not particularly promising. At 3 a.m. we are astir and after a boiled egg and tea we call at the Post Office for a truck load of mail. Loading, Customs clearances etc. completed we take off into darkness and immediately leave behind "sunny Australia". We pass Cape Fourcroy on DR and set course for Koepang heading into heavy rain and clouds down on the waves. Through a break in the low clouds we take a drift sight and lay off 5 more degrees of drift. Onward we plod with an eye on the clock; it is soon time to come down to wave tops and watch for the coast ahead. Ah! there is the coast; pull up, cross the Island and feel our way down the other side, to breakfast and re-fuel. We are greeted by the usual sightseers—shaggy men on shaggy Timor ponies; men with knives in their belts and men whose thoughts would be difficult to imagine.

In the air again, onward over Sumba Island and Waingapoe; onward round the corner of Sumbawa to a landing at Rambang on Lombok Island where the monkeys climb on the fence posts surrounding the aerodrome and chatter and shake their fists at us as we taxi in. The run from Rambang to Surabaya is short; a mere couple of hours in the air and we are again soon free to enjoy a night's rest. We have lost two and bit hours today due to 'change of time' so when we turn in at 9 pm at Surabaya the clocks in Darwin show something after 11 pm; we have, therefore been alert for a total of 20 hours.

Next morning we are called soon after 3 a.m. and find in the hotel dining room a menu that is difficult to describe; there are eggs cooked in about twenty different ways, cold meat, hot meat, curry and stew. We have an omelette and coffee.

Will we clear those bamboos at the end of the field? Yes, we make it with the second dickie almost forcing the throttles through the windscreen. On again past Samarang with myriads of fishing

boats in the bay as the first light breaks through thunder clouds to the east. On past Cheribon; on over the canals; on over paddy fields and timber forests; on past tiny villages built in extinct volcano craters high in the mountains; on across Java to Batavia that is now Djakarta for breakfast and to fill our tanks to capacity for the long haul to Singapore. Towering woolpacks through the valleys of which we twist and turn trying to remain VFR. Finally we bore into heavy rain with lightning flashes on all sides. Two pairs of eyes are glued to the bank and turn indicator and the rev. counter. We pass Muntok on Babka Island; we hope we do anyway as the clock says we should. The turbulence has eased so it seems that we are out over the water again. A break ahead; the rain eases to a fine drizzle. Ah, yes, there is Singapore on track on time. Soon we can relax to the strains of a Viennese waltz played by an Austrian band, enjoy a dinner prepared by a Swiss chef and served by a Malayan boy on English china, refreshed in the meantime by a haircut and shampoo by a Japanese barber followed by Scotch and soda. Let us enjoy this relaxation for we must soon retrace our steps to Brisbane.